Introducing the Issue

Sara McLanahan, Irwin Garfinkel, Ronald B. Mincy, and Elisabeth Donahue

Nonmarital childbearing increased dramatically in the United States during the latter half of the twentieth century, changing the context in which American children are raised. The proportion of all children born to unmarried parents grew tenfold over a seventy-year period—from about 4 percent in 1940 to nearly 40 percent in 2007. The overall impact of these changes has been greatest for African Americans and Hispanics, with seven out of ten black babies and half of Hispanic babies now being born to unmarried parents.¹

In the 1990s, the term "fragile families" was coined to describe the reality of these new family arrangements.2 The word "family" signals that these partnerships are not simply casual encounters. As described below, most unmarried parents are in a romantic relationship at the time their child is born, with approximately 51 percent cohabiting and another 31 percent romantically involved but living apart. The word "fragile" signals that these partnerships face greater risks than more traditional families do in terms of their economic security and relationship stability.3 To understand fully the complexity of

fragile families, however, it is important first to understand the decades-long debate over this issue.

The Debate

Researchers have long disagreed about whether the increase in nonmarital childbearing in the United States should be a cause for concern. At one extreme, analysts argue that nonmarital births are a sign of progress, reflecting an expansion of individual freedom and the growing economic independence of women. For these analysts, unmarried parents are much like married parents, lacking only "the piece of paper." To support their claim, they point to similar childbirth trends throughout Western industrialized countries, particularly Scandinavia, where nonmarital childbearing is more common than it is in the United States and where most unmarried parents are in relatively stable unions. At the other end of the spectrum are scholars who argue that nonmarital births are the product of casual relationships with minimal commitment on the part of fathers who either will not or cannot support their children financially and emotionally. Occupying the middle ground are those who argue that although

Sara McLanahan is editor-in-chief of The Future of Children, as well as director of the Center for Research on Child Wellbeing and the William S. Tod Professor of Sociology and Public Affairs at Princeton University. Irwin Garfinkel is the Mitchell I. Ginsberg Professor of Contemporary Urban Problems at Columbia University and co-director of the Columbia Population Research Center. Ronald B. Mincy is the Maurice V. Russell Professor of Social Policy and Social Work Practice and director of the Center for Fathers, Children, and Family Well-being at Columbia University. Elisabeth Donahue is the executive director of The Future of Children and the assistant dean for public and external affairs at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University.

unmarried parents may be committed to each other and to their children, American fragile families, lacking the generous government support provided by other Westernized countries, experience high poverty rates and severe instability. This last perspective suggests that the increase in nonmarital childbearing in the United States may be contributing to the persistence of racial and class disparities in future generations.

Whatever their place on the spectrum, most analysts agree that for a sizable share of the U.S. population, the conventional sequence of events in the transition to adulthood—school, employment, marriage, and finally parenthood—has been turned upside down. Today's young adults often become parents before they have finished their education, gotten a stable job, and married. As a result, many American children are born into families headed by young, unmarried, and underemployed parents who often go on to have children with other partners.

The nation's debate over the causes and consequences of nonmarital childbearing began almost half a century ago. In his now famous 1965 report, The Negro Family,4 Daniel Patrick Moynihan (then assistant secretary of labor under President Lyndon Johnson) argued that a "tangle of pathology," consisting of nonmarital childbearing, high male unemployment, and welfare dependency, was making it more difficult for African Americans to take advantage of the new opportunities created by the civil rights movement. Initially praised by black leaders for focusing national attention on a serious problem, the report soon became the target of harsh and widespread criticism from liberals (and eventually black leaders themselves). In the aftermath of the debate, social scientists generally avoided discussing the negative aspects of nonmarital childbearing until the 1980s, when the eminent sociologist William Julius Wilson reopened the debate.⁵ During that same decade, the behaviors first noted by Moynihan in black families were being widely adopted by whites and Hispanics, making nonmarital childbearing an issue for disadvantaged families of all races today.⁶

Despite the importance of the topic and the intensity of the debate, empirical evidence on unmarried parents (including fathers) and their children was limited until recently.

The Research

Despite the importance of the topic and the intensity of the debate, empirical evidence on unmarried parents (including fathers) and their children was limited—and the discussion necessarily remained somewhat theoretical—until recently. To build a body of research about the causes and consequences of nonmarital childbearing based on sound evidence, a team of researchers at Columbia and Princeton Universities, which included three editors of this volume, designed and implemented a large national survey, the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study.⁷ Between the spring of 1998 and fall of 2000, the team interviewed parents of approximately 5,000 newborns in hospitals in large cities, with an oversampling of unmarried parents.8 They conducted follow-up interviews when the children were approximately one, three, and five years old. The study data,

which are nationally representative of births in large U.S. cities, form the underpinnings of the findings presented in this volume.

Because not all of the research described in this volume is based on the Fragile Families Study and because other data sets may complicate efforts by analysts to identify fragile families, it is important to be clear about definitions. A fragile family is one in which the parents are unwed at the time of their child's birth. These parents may be cohabiting or living apart. Because relationships change over time, some parents in fragile families may have been married before having a nonmarital birth while others may marry (each other or new partners) afterwards. Thus being a parent in a fragile family is not the same as being a nevermarried parent. Nor is it the same as being a single parent, which typically means raising a child without a partner. Many mothers who have a child outside marriage are cohabiting or co-parenting with the biological father, and many single mothers were married at the time their child was born (and subsequently divorced). The authors in this volume have attempted to clarify the populations they are examining when using data that do not allow them to identify fragile families precisely.

Finally, although a primary motivation for conducting the Fragile Families Study was to enable researchers to learn more about the fathers in these families, especially those living apart from their children, and although the study has provided new insights about these men, many important research and policy questions related to fathers remain unanswered. For example, the article in this volume on higher education is based almost entirely on studies of mothers in higher education, because few data sources or studies of higher education collect or analyze data on the college enrollment or performance of men by their

parental or residential status. Similarly, despite the thirty-odd-year history of responsiblefatherhood programs and the growing interest of policy makers in fatherhood programs in the past two decades, these programs have rarely been rigorously evaluated.9 Rather, most responsible-fatherhood programs are the result of grassroots efforts to address father absence in low-income, minority communities with little involvement from the research community. Thus the paper in this volume that examines marriage and fatherhood programs cannot tell us very much about the communitybased programs.

The Findings

To resolve the debate about the causes, consequences, and policy implications of nonmarital childbearing, it is important to lay out the basic questions that this volume addresses.

First, who are these families? What are their capabilities? What is the nature of parental relationships and how do they change over time? Are children born outside of marriage connected to both parents, and do they remain connected? In other words, are fragile families in the United States made up of stable cohabiters as is typical of unmarried parents in Scandinavian countries, or do they look different, and if so, how?

Second, how do children in these families fare? Do their births into nontraditional families have positive, negative, or neutral effects on their well-being? What are the mechanisms and pathways that are responsible for these effects?

Finally, with the trend toward forming fragile families showing no sign of slowing, should researchers and policy makers be concerned? Does the ongoing trend pose problems, and

if so, what is the role of government policy in providing solutions? How should current policies aimed at reducing child poverty and improving child well-being be modified if fathers in fragile families are in fact more involved than conventional wisdom acknowledges? Perhaps more controversially, is there an appropriate role for government in preventing the formation of fragile families in the first place?

To answer these questions, we commissioned a group of experts to write nine articles. The first four articles examine fragile families from various vantage points of the family: the couple, the mother, the father, and the child. The fifth looks at particular issues of race and ethnicity. The last four delve into policy issues that have special pertinence for fragile families: pregnancy prevention, incarceration, postsecondary education, and marriage and fatherhood programs. Next, we briefly highlight some of the papers' key findings.

Fragile Family Couples

In the first article, "Parental Relationships in Fragile Families," Sara McLanahan and Audrey Beck, both of Princeton University, focus on four aspects of the parental relationship: the stability of the living arrangement, the quality of the relationship itself, the nonresident father's involvement with his child, and the quality of the co-parenting relationship. Their analysis dispels conventional wisdom that nonmarital births are a result of casual encounters. At the time of the birth, most parents are romantically involved and have high hopes that they will get married; most, however, are not able to establish stable unions or long-term coparenting relationships. Five years after birth, a third of fathers have virtually disappeared from their children's lives. New partnerships bringing new children are

common, leading to high levels of instability and complexity in these families.

To understand why relationships among unmarried parents are so unstable, the authors look at the key determinants of parental relationships. Among the predictors of instability are low economic resources, government policies that contain marriage penalties, cultural norms that support single motherhood; demographic factors, such as shortages of marriageable men; and psychological factors that make it difficult for parents to maintain healthy relationships. No single factor appears to be dominant.

The authors also explore strategies for improving parental relationships in fragile families. They point out that although economic resources are a consistent predictor of positive outcomes, researchers and policy makers lack solid information on whether increasing fathers' employment and earnings will increase relationship quality and union stability. They note that analysts need to know more about whether relationship quality in fragile families can be improved directly and whether doing so will increase union stability, father involvement, and co-parenting quality. Although a recent interim evaluation of the Building Strong Families Project found no effects overall of programs designed to increase marriage and improve relationship quality among unmarried parents,10 it did show positive effects for African American couples (combined across all cities), and in Oklahoma City it showed a number of positive effects on several outcomes for all racial groups combined, though not for marriage. The authors conclude that ongoing experiments to test the effectiveness of relationship programs, originally designed for married couples but now used for unmarried parents, are important for shaping future interventions.

Fragile Family Mothers

The second article, "Mothers' Economic Conditions and Sources of Support in Fragile Families," by Ariel Kalil of the University of Chicago and Rebecca Ryan of Georgetown University, examines the public and private resources that mothers contribute in fragile families. Data based on the Fragile Families Study show that very few unmarried mothers earn enough to support themselves and their children at more than twice the federal poverty level. Nor are mothers able to accumulate assets to tide them through inevitable financial difficulties.

Mothers in fragile families make ends meet in many ways. Although the authors show that various public programs, particularly those that provide in-kind assistance, do successfully lessen economic hardship in fragile families, many of the most effective programs, such as the earned income tax credit, hinge on mothers' employment. And because the nation's recovery from the Great Recession, which began in December 2007, has been painfully slow, there is reason for concern about the stability of the public safety net for mothers with little education and those who face other barriers to employment.

Because of limited safety net resources, mothers in fragile families may turn more often to private sources of support—friends, family, boyfriends—for cash and in-kind assistance. But though these private safety nets are essential to many mothers' economic survival, they cannot promote long-term economic mobility. Given that the fragile family is likely an enduring fixture in this country, the authors argue that it is essential to strengthen policies that both support these families' economic self-sufficiency and alleviate their hardship during inevitable times of economic distress. They advocate

strengthening the public safety net—especially such in-kind benefits as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits (formerly food stamps), Medicaid, housing, and child care—and bolstering community-based programs that can provide private financial support, such as emergency cash assistance, child care, and food aid when mothers cannot receive it from their own private networks.

Fragile Family Fathers

Robert Lerman, of American University and the Urban Institute, devotes much of the third article, "Capabilities and Contributions of Unwed Fathers," to examining how the capabilities and contributions of unwed fathers fall short of those of married fathers, and how those capabilities and contributions differ by the kind of relationship the fathers have with their children's mothers, a relationship that changes as infants grow into toddlers and kindergartners. He describes the striking heterogeneity in the earnings of unwed fathers, with the bottom quarter earning less than \$10,000 per year.

Although most unwed fathers spend considerable time with their children in the years soon after birth, over time their involvement erodes. Men who lose touch with their children are likely to see their earnings stagnate, tend to provide less financial support, and often find themselves with new obligations when they father children with another partner. By contrast, the unwed fathers who marry or cohabit with their child's mother earn considerably higher wages and work substantially more than those who do not marry or cohabit. Although Lerman describes evidence indicating that much of the gap in earnings between unwed fathers who marry and fathers who remain single is attributable to marriage itself, this finding is

controversial. ¹¹ As he points out, marriage alone does not explain the significant differences in earnings that are associated with the lower age, education, and work experience of unmarried fathers. Many scholars including the editors go further and believe the evidence indicates that marriage can account for only a very small proportion of the gap in earnings between men who have children within marriage and men who do not, given the large disparities in the human capital between these two groups of men.

Lerman points out that several factors influence the extent to which unwed fathers stay involved with their children. Better-educated fathers, those who most identify with the father's role, and those with good relationships with their children's mothers, are most likely to sustain a relationship with their children. Some studies even find that strong child support enforcement increases father involvement, though for many low-income fathers, child support obligations represent such a large share of their incomes that they are discouraged from entering the formal job market, particularly when those benefits go to the state for reimbursement of welfare outlays rather than to their children.

Until recently, policies dealing with noncustodial unwed fathers focused almost entirely on increasing child support collections. Recognizing the limits of that approach and the need to raise the earnings capacity of unwed fathers generally, policy makers have begun considering new steps. One initiative includes programs to improve the relationship and communication skills of unwed fathers and mothers. As noted, the jury is still out as to whether these efforts, which are still in their early stages, offer the promise of increasing marriages, improving marital stability, and enhancing couple relationships—and thus perhaps of increasing the earnings of fathers. Adding employment components would likely enhance these marriage education initiatives. Another promising strategy is to raise earnings through targeted training, such as apprenticeships that allow unwed fathers to earn a salary while they learn skills.

Fragile Family Children

The fourth paper, "Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing," concludes that children who grow up in single-mother and cohabiting families fare worse than children born into married-couple households. Jane Waldfogel and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, both of Columbia University, and Terry-Ann Craigie, of Princeton University, note that analysts have investigated five key pathways that underlie the links between family structure and child well-being: parental resources, parental mental health, parental relationship quality, parenting quality, and father involvement. Researchers have also looked into the likely role of selection—the presence of different types of men and women in different family types—as well as the roles of family stability and instability. But they remain uncertain about which pathways explain children's outcomes.

In addition to providing an overview of findings from other studies using the Fragile Families Study, Waldfogel, Craigie, and Brooks-Gunn also report their own estimates of the effect of a consistently defined set of family structure and stability categories on a set of child outcomes at age five in the Fragile Families Study. They find that being raised in a fragile family does not have uniform effects on child outcomes. Family instability, for example, seems to matter more than family structure for cognitive and health outcomes, whereas growing up with a single mother (regardless of stability) is more

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important for behavior problems. Overall, their findings are consistent with other evidence that being raised by stable single or cohabiting parents seems to entail less risk than being raised by single or cohabiting parents when these family types are unstable.

The authors conclude by pointing to three types of policy reforms that could improve outcomes for children. The first reform is to lower the share of children growing up in fragile families by reducing the rate of unwed births or promoting family stability among unwed parents. The second is to address the pathways that place such children at risk for example, through boosting resources in single-parent homes or fostering father involvement in fragile families. The third is to address directly the risks these children face—for example, through high-quality early childhood education and home-visiting programs.

Race and Ethnicity

Robert Hummer, of the Univerty of Texas-Austin, and Erin Hamilton, of the University of California–Davis, note that the prevalence of fragile families varies substantially by race and ethnicity. African Americans and Hispanics have the highest prevalence; Asians, the lowest: and whites fall somewhere in the middle. The share of unmarried births is lower among most foreign-born mothers than among their U.S.-born ethnic counterparts. Immigrant-native differences are particularly large for Asians, whites, and blacks.

The authors also find racial and ethnic differences in the composition and stability of fragile families over time. Although most parents of all racial and ethnic groups are romantically involved at the time of their child's birth, African American women are less likely to be in a cohabiting relationship than are white and Hispanic mothers. Over time, these racial and ethnic differences become more pronounced, with African American mothers having the lowest rates of marriage and cohabitation and the highest breakup rates, and Mexican immigrant mothers having the highest rates of marriage and cohabitation and the lowest breakup rates.

Fragile families have far fewer socioeconomic resources than married families, though resources vary within fragile families by race and ethnicity. White mothers, in general, have more socioeconomic resources than black, Mexican American, and Mexican immigrant mothers; they are more likely to have incomes above the poverty limit, more likely to own a car, less likely to have children from a prior relationship, and more likely to report living in a safe neighborhood. Access to health care and child care follows a similar pattern. The exception is education; black and white unmarried mothers are equally likely to have finished high school, and Mexican immigrant and Mexican American mothers are less likely to have done so.

The authors argue that socioeconomic differences are by far the biggest driver of racial and ethnic differences in marriage and family stability, and they support reforms to strengthen parents' economic security. They also discuss how sex ratios and culture affect family formation and stability. In particular, they note that despite severe poverty, Mexican immigrant families have high rates of marriage and cohabitation—an advantage that erodes by the second generation with assimilation. To address the paradox that marriage in these families declines as socioeconomic status improves, they support policies that reinforce rather than undermine the family ties of Mexican immigrants.

Pregnancy Prevention

Isabel Sawhill, Adam Thomas, and Emily Monea, all of the Brookings Institution, believe that in view of the well-documented costs of nonmarital births to both children and parents in fragile families, as well as to society as a whole, policy makers' primary goal should be to reduce births to unmarried parents, especially since so many unmarried parents have their first children when they are teenagers.

The authors observe that the swiftly rising nonmarital birth rate has many explanations -a cultural shift toward acceptance of unwed childbearing, a lack of alternatives to motherhood among the disadvantaged, a sense of fatalism or ambivalence about pregnancy, a lack of marriageable men, limited access to effective contraception, inadequate knowledge about contraception, and the difficulty of using contraception consistently and correctly.

Noting that these explanations fall generally into three categories—motivation, knowledge, and access—the authors discuss

policies designed to motivate individuals to avoid unintended pregnancies, to improve their knowledge about contraception, and to remove barriers to contraceptive access. Some motivational programs, such as media campaigns, have been effective in changing behavior. Some, but not all, sex education programs designed to reduce teen pregnancy have also been effective at reducing sexual activity or increasing contraceptive use, or both. Programs providing access to subsidized contraception have also been effective and would be even more so if they could increase the use not just of contraceptives, but of long-acting, reversible contraceptive methods such as intrauterine devices (IUDs) and injections.

Finally, the authors present simulations of the costs and effects of three policy initiatives a mass media campaign that encourages men to use condoms, a teen pregnancy prevention program that discourages sexual activity and educates teen participants about proper contraceptive use, and an expansion in access to Medicaid-subsidized contraception. All three have benefit-cost ratios that are comfortably greater than one and are sound investments worthy of consideration by policy makers. The Medicaid expansion has the largest benefit-cost ratio, followed by the condom use campaign and then by the teen pregnancy program.

Incarceration

Rapidly rising rates of incarceration in the United States since the mid-1970s have proved damaging to the nation's poor and minority communities. The effects of this prison boom have been concentrated among those already on the periphery of society: black and (to a lesser degree) white men with little schooling—the same segments of society in which fragile families are most

likely to be formed. Christopher Wildeman, of Yale University, and Bruce Western, of Harvard University, explain that the drastic increases in the American incarceration rate were driven by urban manufacturing decline, a booming drug trade that fostered addiction and careers in crime, and a punitive turn in criminal justice policy.

Imprisonment diminishes the earnings of adult men, compromises their health, reduces familial resources, contributes to family breakup, and adds to the deficits of poor children—increasing the likelihood that the effects of imprisonment on inequality are transferred across generations. Perversely, incarceration has its most corrosive effects on families whose fathers were involved in neither domestic violence nor violent crime before being imprisoned. Because having a parent go to prison is now so common for poor, minority children and affects them so negatively, the authors argue that mass imprisonment may exacerbate future racial and class inequality—and may even lead to more crime in the long term, thereby undoing any crimereducing benefits of the prison boom.

Wildeman and Western advocate several policy reforms. The first is to limit prison time for drug offenders and for parolees who violate the technical conditions of their parole (as opposed to committing new crimes), relying instead on inexpensive and effective alternatives such as intensive community supervision, drug treatment, and graduated sanctions that allow parole and probation officers to respond to violations without immediately resorting to prison sentences. A second reform is to support men and women returning home from prison, thus diminishing recidivism rates and improving employment among ex-prisoners.

But Wildeman and Western argue that criminal justice reform alone will not solve the problems of school failure, joblessness, untreated addiction, and mental illness that pave the way to prison. In fact, focusing solely on criminal justice reforms would repeat the mistakes of the prison boom, during which the nation tried to solve social problems with criminal justice policies. Addressing those problems, they say, will require a greater commitment to education, public health, and the employment opportunities of low-skilled men and women.

Education

Noting that access to higher education has expanded dramatically in the past several decades, Sara Goldrick-Rab and Kia Sorensen, both of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, focus on how postsecondary education affects the lives of unmarried mothers in fragile families. Contrary to the widespread expectation that access to college always promotes family stability and economic security, the authors argue that because current postsecondary educational policy and practice is insufficiently supportive, college attendance may, ironically, have substantial downsides for many families headed by unmarried parents.

Although rates of college attendance have increased substantially among unmarried parents, college completion rates are low. Many unmarried mothers struggle to complete degree or certificate programs because of inadequate academic preparation. And severe financial constraints can cause them to interrupt their studies or increase their work hours, thus decreasing their chance to finish their studies. Despite having made it to college, they are squeezed for time and money in ways that create significant stress and compromise both the quality of their educational experiences and the outcomes for their children.

The authors point out that many public programs, such as Pell Grants, federal subsidized loans, and welfare, offer support to unmarried mothers attending college. But the programs are neither well coordinated nor easily accessed. Over the past three decades, loans have increasingly replaced grants as the most common form of federal and state support for students seeking to finance college. Confusion about what is available leads many low-income students to the two most "straightforward" sources of income—loans and work, both of which involve significant costs and can work at cross-purposes with public forms of support. The Pell Grant penalizes students for attending college a few classes at a time and is not available to anyone with a drug conviction while in college.

Some evidence shows that providing social, financial, and academic supports to community college students can improve achievement and attainment for vulnerable students. For example, students who participate in contextualized learning programs—hands-on courses that tie the lessons to the lives and experiences of the students—are more likely than nonparticipants to move on from basic skills to credit-bearing coursework and successfully complete credits, earn certificates, and make gains on basic skills tests. Another successful initiative provides special counseling services to low-income students with a history of academic difficulties and gives them a small stipend of \$150 per semester when they use those services. Several states are also conducting experimental performance-based financial aid programs at community colleges to test their effectiveness.

Marriage and Fatherhood Programs

To improve the quality and stability of couple and father-child relationships in fragile families, researchers are beginning to consider

how to tailor existing couple-relationship programs (which generally target married or middle-income couples) and fatherinvolvement interventions to the specific needs of unwed couples in fragile families. The goal, explain authors Philip Cowan and Carolyn Cowan, of the University of California-Berkeley, and Virginia Knox, of MDRC, is to provide a more supportive developmental context for mothers, fathers, and, especially, the children in fragile families.

The authors present a conceptual model to explain why couple-relationship and fatherinvolvement interventions that were developed for middle- and low-income married couples might be expected to provide benefits for children of unmarried parents. They summarize the extensive research on existing couple-relationship and father-involvement interventions, noting that only a few of the programs for couples and a handful of fatherhood programs have been systematically evaluated. Of those that have been evaluated, few have included unmarried couples as participants and none has investigated whether interventions may have different effects when unmarried fathers live with or apart from the child. Furthermore, although programs for couples or fathers tout the potential benefits for children, they rarely assess child outcomes systematically.

The authors consider whether effective interventions designed for working- and middle-class fathers or couples might be helpful to fragile families. They offer the example of one project in which an intervention for low-income parents included random assignment to a couples group or a fathersonly group that focused on key facets of family life including parenting and couple-relationship quality. The intervention was equally effective for married and unmarried parents. Because

the evidence suggests that couple-oriented programs also had a positive effect on father involvement and on lowering parenting stress, the authors recommend integrating couple and fatherhood interventions to increase their power to reduce the risks and enhance the protective factors for children's development and well-being. This conclusion, however, is tempered by the recent findings in the Building Strong Families evaluation that found, on average, no effects of relationship programs on a host of outcomes, including father involvement in most families in the study. The authors emphasize the need for more research on program development to understand the most effective ways to strengthen co-parenting by couples who are the biological parents of a child but who have relatively tenuous, or already dissolved, relationships with one another.

Policy Implications

Taken as a whole, this volume makes it clear that fragile families are both a consequence and a cause of economic inequality. Compared with married couples, couples who have children outside marriage are highly disadvantaged—younger, less healthy, much less educated—at the time of their child's birth. Moreover, although a majority of unmarried parents have "high hopes" for a future together, a nontrivial proportion of these young men and women express distrust of the opposite sex and believe that a single mother can raise a child as well as a married mother can. Together, these characteristics support the claim that nonmarital childbearing is a consequence of disadvantage. They also suggest that both economic and cultural factors have contributed to the rise in fragile families.

The volume also shows that nonmarital childbearing exacerbates pre-existing disadvantage by reducing opportunities for children as they grow up, primarily through family instability and complexity. Unmarried couples are much more likely than married couples to end their relationships, and the ongoing search for new partners leads to high levels of instability, periods of single motherhood, and declining father involvement in these families. Moreover, because most unmarried parents in fragile families are in their peak childbearing years, new partnerships frequently lead to new children, and ultimately to complex households in which mothers are forced to negotiate with several different fathers over visitation and over child support requirements, which many fathers have a hard time meeting because they have financial obligations to children in other households. Instability and complexity reduce parents' economic resources and increase mental health problems that, in turn, reduce the quantity and quality of the parenting that children receive. Ultimately, inadequate resources and poor parenting undermine children's opportunities, thus reproducing inequality in the next generation.

So what can and should be done? Is there a role for social policy? Some might argue that couples who form fragile families make many individual decisions that are private and outside the realm of the government. Among those decisions are whether to marry, whether to have children, whether to stay together; whether to visit, support, or abandon nonresident children; whether to facilitate or block nonresident father involvement. And yet the government is hardly neutral when it comes to forming policy that affects how families are formed, how their finances and access to children are treated, and how such matters as custody, child support, and property division are handled if families break up. Given the negative outcomes for

fragile families that this volume documents, we believe the government should step in.

Government programs already play a large role in the lives of fragile families. Some of these programs succeed in reducing poverty and economic insecurity, though often at a personal cost to the families. Some, for example, compromise a couple's relationship—by discouraging marriage through income tests that keep parents from taking advantage of economies of scale or by increasing conflict between parents who live apart through sometimes unforgiving child support regulations. Other policies, such as using child support payments to reimburse government spending on children, create barriers to nonresident father involvement. Efforts to improve the lives of children in fragile families should focus on increasing resources and capacities and improving relationships among unmarried parents.

Drawing from the policies recommended throughout the volume and our own understanding of the issues, we believe that implementing the following four steps would strengthen fragile families. The first step would be to decrease the number of nonmarital births by "going to scale" with programs designed to encourage more responsible sexual behavior and by expanding access to effective contraception among individuals who might not otherwise be able to afford it. The second step would be to increase union stability and father involvement in fragile families by building on marriage-education programs aimed at improving relationship skills and communitybased programs aimed at raising nonresident fathers' earnings, child support payments, and parental involvement. In the case of the marriage programs, this would mean expanding services to include employment

and training and mental health components. In the case of the fatherhood programs, it would mean conducting rigorous evaluations to determine what works. The third step would be to redesign tax and transfer programs, especially in-kind programs, so that children have access to high-quality early education and high-quality health care, and so that these benefits are not cut or reduced if parents marry or live together. Finally, we are intrigued by the two articles in this volume that document the role of postsecondary education and penal policy in the lives of fragile families, and we urge researchers and policy makers to develop and rigorously evaluate new demonstrations in these two areas, especially policies that provide alternatives to incarceration.

Of all the findings from the Fragile Families Study that are highlighted in this volume, the one with by far the most critical policy implications is the high level of commitment among unmarried new parents. More than 80 percent of unmarried parents are in a romantic relationship at the time of their child's birth, and most of these parents have high hopes for a future together. Further, even after parents have ended their romantic relationships, about half of the fathers remain involved with their child on a regular basis, although this proportion declines as parents form new relationships and have children with new partners. Based on these findings, we believe that the birth of the child should be viewed as a "magic moment" when both fathers and mothers may be highly motivated to work together to improve their relationship and co-parenting skills and to deal with other problems that may limit their ability to support their children. For this reason, services to parents in fragile families should be immediate, intense, and focused on the couple in their role as cooperative parents. Fashioned as a bumper sticker, our recommendation

would be "Support the three T's: Treat early, Treat often, and Treat together."

Conclusion

The dramatic increase in nonmarital births in the United States cannot be written off as a simple "lifestyle choice" that has no implications for child well-being. Nor is it simply a result of a rise in casual sexual encounters. The vast majority of children born outside

of marriage are born to parents in committed yet fragile relationships. Our challenge in this volume is to explore the ramifications of this new reality and to fashion policy recommendations that reduce the number of fragile families in the first place, and that ensure that children born into fragile families receive the support they need to grow into healthy, productive adults.

Endnotes

- 1. National Vital Statistics Report 57, no. 7 (January 7, 2009), table 18.
- 2. Specifically, the term was developed by Ronald B. Mincy, one of the editors of this volume, as part of the Ford Foundation's Strengthening Fragile Families Initiative.
- The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study: National Report, Revised March 2003, page 3; found at www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/documents/nationalreport.pdf.
- 4. The Negro Family: The Case for National Action (Office of Policy Planning and Research, U.S. Department of Labor, March 1965).
- 5. William J. Wilson, The Truly Disadvantaged (Harvard University Press, 1988).
- 6. National Vital Statistics Report (see note 1).
- For information about the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, go to www.fragilefamilies.princeton. edu/index.asp.
- 8. The final sample contained nearly 5,000 births, including approximately 3,600 births to unmarried parents and approximately 1,200 births to married parents. When weighted, the data are nationally representative of births in U.S. cities with populations of 200,000 or more.
- 9. See Earl Johnson, Ann Levine, and Fred Doolittle, *Fathers' Fair Share: Helping Poor Fathers Manage Child Support and Fatherhood* (Russell Sage Foundation, 1999).
- 10. Robert Wood and others, "The Building Strong Families Project: Strengthening Unmarried Parents' Relationships: The Early Impacts of Building Strong Families" (Mathematica Policy Research, May 2010). In eight sites across the country, 5,000 couples were randomly assigned to a Building Strong Families program or a control group after volunteering to participate. Data on whether the couples were more likely to stay together, get married, improve relationship quality, improve co-parenting, or increase father involvement were collected after fifteen months. When the results were averaged, no effects were found on these outcomes, with two exceptions. The Oklahoma City site had positive effects on a number of outcomes, though not marriage; the Baltimore site had negative effects, including an increase in domestic violence. The program also showed positive effects for relationship quality for couples in which both were African American.
- Ronald Mincy, Jennifer Hill, and Marilyn Sinkewicz, "Marriage: Cause or Mere Indicator of Future Earnings Growth?" *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 28, no. 3 (2009): 417–39.